

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Advice to New Veterinary Students: Class of 2017

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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Here you are just days from matriculating at [State] College of Veterinary Medicine. You are filled with self-doubt and apprehension (They chose the wrong person); exhilaration (I finally get to start the career I've always dreamed of); and fear (How will I ever get a job and pay off these loans?).

I understand your fears, because I was also in your position once. Over the past almost four decades, I have also witnessed about 3,500 students matriculate into veterinary college, and many of them started their careers having faced similar emotions to what you may be experiencing today.

Notice, I said start their *careers*—not start their *veterinary education*—because that's what you're doing. Don't let the professors or your classmates tell you otherwise. Too often you set your sights on getting into veterinary college, passing your exams, getting a summer job—short term goals that are right in front of you, causing immediate stress—rather than preparing for your real goal of becoming a consequential veterinarian.

You are, of course, not given your DVM degree during orientation. But if you are not prepared to think, act and develop the confidence and moral compass of a successful and ethical veterinarian as you walk through the doors of your future *Alma mater* this fall, then this may not be the profession for you. Thinking as a committed, practicing veterinarian at the start of your education is that critical to your long term success and to the impact you have on this profession that is populated in the US by only 100,000 doctors of veterinary medicine.

Sixty years ago, professors used to tell their students, "Look to your left and to your right; one of you will not be here in four years." Professors won't tell you that anymore, but many of you will tell it to yourselves, *and that's worse*. So for all you who have self-doubts and feel you shouldn't be here, remember that admission committees make relatively few errors in deciding who is capable of making the grade. In other words, you were selected because we thought you could have what it takes to succeed in this profession, regardless of the inherent self-doubt you may be feeling at this stage of your career.

On the first day of third-year surgery class in the fall of 1972, our instructor at the University of Guelph walked into the lecture hall with his scrubs smeared with blood, white shoes likewise, and peered over his half-framed glasses at 80 bored students fumbling with their note pads. Whining in his thick British accent, he admonished us in a manner that later defined my own career as a surgeon. “I can teach a monkey to operate in six months,” he said, “You are veterinarians and I’m here to teach you not how to do surgery, but how to become a surgeon.”

Dr. Archibald was right. Whether your goal is to become a food animal specialist, a small animal internist, a wildlife veterinarian or a public health researcher, all of you will learn what you need to know to diagnose and prevent disease and treat illness. The bigger challenge is to *become a veterinarian*; and the first stop on that journey is to learn how to navigate in the real world with real people and real animals.

The most important course you will take this year is ***next summer***, after official classes are over for the spring semester. Unless you have an irrevocable reason to stay at your home institution, get out of Ithaca, or Pullman, or Columbus, or Blacksburg and find a real job with real people. And despite what your professors and friends and mentors are telling you, a summer seeped in veterinary medicine may not be the best thing for you at this early stage. For example, if you’ve never served people, really served people, be a waitress or a bar tender in an understaffed and low-tip joint. If you’ve never worked hard—really pushed yourself physically and mentally and emotionally, so that you get outside your comfort zone—go to Alaska or Montana or Mississippi and work as a laborer 80 hours per week. If you’ve never learned about human health, get your hands dirty and challenge your emotions in an adult care facility or a Hospice center. You will be an effective veterinarian only when you realize that animals have the capacity to improve human health. That’s at the core of the “one health” concept that you hear all around you.

Instead of hanging around a veterinarian’s office for little or no pay (or even for good pay at Banfield’s), I recommend that you challenge your limits and develop better collateral vision. That will serve you well in four years when you are seeking that first job or an internship.

Become well rounded in society and read more than your veterinary assignments. Find a way to skim the news headlines and the editorial pages each day. And don’t just read the *New York Times*; everybody does that! Read something you can disagree with, or at least skim the titles. You will occasionally find an article or op-ed that will make you realize why people push back against conventional wisdom

And branch out by reading the titles of the articles in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Lancet*, *Science* and *DVM360*. This is the digital era, it’s all at your finger tips, and you in the millennial generation are good at multi-tasking.

Always keep a few good books by your bedside or on your iPad. Among my personal reading this month are: *Lean In*, *Empire of the Summer Moon*, *Genius on the Edge* (for the third time), and one of my perennial favorites, *The Book of Esther*.

And finally, have a sense humor. If you don't have one now, get a deferral and come back to veterinary college when you have discovered how to laugh at yourself and to laugh with others. Now that you are a veterinarian (almost), be happy, be fulfilled and be yourself.

Oh, and don't forget to thank the custodial staff from time to time and, if you live in the Northeast or Midwest, wipe the snow and salt off your boots in the winter before you mess up the floors that they just spent the early morning hours shining.

Enjoy the profession!!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.